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Writing Responsibly

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Panel: The Calling: Writing with Responsibility

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Writing Responsibly

Today, I want to talk about my social responsibility as a woman writer in Afghanistan. I sincerely hope that my words can convey my intentions clearly; that they are readily accessible to others; and that they are worthy of being remembered.

I must tell you at once that my pen is indeed my weapon. Like a soldier carrying a rifle on his shoulder, I too carry my weapon with me at all times. It is my duty to defend the borders of women's lives, and of humanity in general.

I have arrived at the conclusion that the form of art produced in Afghanistan is very different from the rest of the world, similar to the differences in the living conditions of different countries. In Afghanistan, we must emerge as a strong voice through our art. Our art should strike a forceful blow to the eyes of its viewers. We must draw an image that is forever unforgettable. I must strive to produce a novel that can be used like a weapon against injustice and violence. For instance, consider a female character in one of my novels: she is constantly striving to liberate her head, her legs, her hands, from the coercive ties of her culture's conservative, traditional norms. She is constantly pushing aside her veil, which obstructs her vision. As a writer, I must stand by and defend this character in every line I write. And both my character and I must remain prepared for every impending battle.

The image of a woman who does not conform to the prevalent cultural norms may hit hard a great number of viewers. And if these are men, they may retaliate with an even harsher jab in the eyes of the woman writer. However, if the spectators are women, they will feel acutely the pain of the blow struck by the image, and this experience will transform their inherent selves.

We do believe in global standards for art. However, sometimes specific aesthetic styles evolve in remote cultures, from where they gradually spread to other parts of the world. Although they then may become popular in a foreign setting, they are not always capable of responding to the local needs and issues of a foreign culture. We thus cannot think about art and its presence in Afghanistan in the same way as an American writer thinks about art in the US. American art is produced by artists who have experienced American geography, politics, economy, and culture. And my art is representative of my political, cultural and social conditions in Afghanistan.

My creative impulses are mostly focused towards thinking *what* it is that I wish to tell in my story. Others are more interested in thinking *how* it is that they want to tell their story: this is particularly the case for postmodernists.

As women writers in Afghanistan, however, our writing must serve as both an art and a weapon: we are at once waging a war as an expression of our social responsibility and professing peace as an expression of our art. Both tendencies must be accommodated on the same page of our novels. Ultimately, our struggle against injustice and violence is aimed at gaining peace. This is our current style of art—a socially responsible art.

Sometimes our concern with social responsibility prevents us from considering international standards in the art of novel writing. Globally, this art is moving towards greater clarity, and yet it has its own specific complexities with regards to both form and content. But when we accept our social responsibility as writers, we must articulate the general spirit of our society.

Sometimes our readers are emotionally tired of—indeed, fed up with—their social and political conditions. Their hearts crave a story unimpeded by formal contrivances, one that flows freely, like the lullaby they once heard on their mother’s lap during the quiet hour of evening. Sometimes they seek a story that feels like the hug of their father, who has been lost in suicide attacks. Sometimes their spirits are so low that they simply want to stroll, gently and calmly.

The art of responsible writing in my country must strive to become a mother’s lullaby or a father’s hug. When it is a lullaby, it must carry the fragrance and fervor of the mother—and the newer forms are often incapable of evoking such lullaby. Afghani writers and artists are all familiar with new styles and methods of creative writing, and they preserve these new techniques in their minds like a princess preserves her romantic tales. They, however, need to look at their society carefully as they commence writing new stories.

Sometimes they talk eloquently, and sometimes they are ambiguous. But the minds of socially responsible writers in Afghanistan can never stay calm and serene—not even when they have completed their work. For the launch of a new work is not really a moment of joy for them; it is a ceremony they mortally fear. They are scared because they reflect upon their society, and they feel responsible for their art and humanity. On the contrary, some ignorant members of that society do not like the reflection of these realities in a work of art. Thus, the strongest fear comes once an artist has acted responsibly.

Different groups are fighting in Afghanistan: large political mafia groups, giant rival countries, Taliban, ISIS (Dayesh), etc. But a new group that has entered the stage with full energy are artists, fighting with open minds and fierce eyes and ears. Sometimes with immense courage, and sometimes with fear: they paint scenes; they compose poems; they write novels; they make movies. Their goal is to fulfill their social and ethical responsibility in a society that has been severely damaged, to bring about change that will gently refine spirits and improve morals.

In this new group, a few women are risking their lives, writing alongside their male counterparts. Their motivation comes from their experience of immense pain. There are very few professional women writers in Afghanistan; you could count them on the fingers of one hand. But they have been witness to the history of pain in our society. Our stories, feelings, loves and lives are unique in their hardship and the enormity of that hardship. As women writers, we have the responsibility of representing women in Afghanistan; we must express their pain and suffering without concealing their strength and endurance in the garb of perplexing poetics.

This is not to say that Afghani women writers have forgotten their artistic mission. Rather, I say that we are aware of our artistic and social responsibility as a new page in the history of Afghanistan is being inaugurated, where a battle against injustice and violence is waged alongside artistic innovations in an attempt to benefit humans before art. After all, isn’t it true of art in all schools of philosophy and all styles of expression that it is ultimately supposed to lead society towards progress?

Perhaps the most difficult struggle for Afghani women writers is how to responsibly give shape to their personal emotions and feelings: for decades they have lived in fear, and their emotions have remained unexpressed. A woman does not talk about herself or about her womanhood and feminine sensibilities. She is always covered in a veil of dust, which effaces both her presence in and absence from the world. Testifying to her presence in the world will itself be a difficult task. But isn’t responsible writing always difficult? It is—and always will be—the duty of art to protect humans and their emotions, feelings and sentiments. Afghani women writers must consider art as the savior of their souls.